

6 Anti-Trafficking and Feminism

Survivors are Movement Activists

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Survivors need to be at the forefront of the movement, prized for their expertise and input and not just for their stories.

Jada, anti-sex trafficking activist and survivor

Feminist activists working to end sex trafficking in the 21st century have succeeded in bringing unprecedented public concern and resources to rescuing women from commercial sex.¹ Doing so involved the reframing of forced prostitution, and sometimes all prostitution, as a form of violence against women that must be eradicated. Research on the contemporary anti-sex trafficking movement posits it is run largely by feminist allies working on behalf of trafficking victims. Scholars, sex worker rights activists, and survivors of sex trafficking themselves note the absence of survivors able to participate as activists.² Survivors are generally included only in the limited role of bringing authenticity to the movement through providing stories of their victimization that help legitimate the movement's claims and goals.

Based on ethnographic fieldwork and interviews with survivor activists, I argue that while survivor participation in the contemporary anti-sex trafficking movement is heavily restricted by movement structure and ideology, survivors nonetheless make important activist contributions. Survivors co-opt the roles provided for them to assert their humanity beyond the role of victim, come out and build solidarity with other survivors, and use their experiences to demand legitimacy as qualified experts to challenge the dominant strategies and goals of the anti-sex trafficking movement. I find that the substantive contributions of survivor activism are essential to building an inclusive and effective feminist movement against sex trafficking.

The Movement Against Sex Trafficking

Anti-sex trafficking movement organizations frequently cite a 2017 International Labour Organization report that estimates there are 4.8 million persons in forced sexual exploitation worldwide, 2 million of whom are children. However, data regarding the actual rates of the problem are highly

disputed and prostitution researchers claim these estimates are grossly inflated (Jahic and Finckenauer 2005; Laczko and Gramegna 2003; Weitzer and Ditmore 2010). While the exact scale of the problem remains unclear, sex trafficking is certainly real and demands public concern and appropriate intervention, both domestically and transnationally.

The Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 defines “severe” sex trafficking as compelling an adult into a commercial sex act through “force, fraud or coercion” or a child into a commercial sex act under any circumstances (22 U.S.C. § 7101 2000). The anti-sex trafficking movement regularly highlights experiences in commercial sex that fall under this definition, such as having a pimp, or migrating for the purposes of other employment and being tricked into prostitution. However, the vast majority of commercial sex does not fit this legal definition of severe trafficking. These experiences can include everything from working voluntarily as an escort to engaging in survival sex without coercion by a third party, neither of which fall under the legal definition of trafficking. A growing body of literature clearly establishes that commercial sex can better be understood as encompassing a wide range of worker experiences and degrees of agency (see Weitzer 2014; Agustín 2007; Zhang et al. 2014; Brennan 2014; Brents, Jackson and Hausbeck 2009). As in other service industries, degrees of safety and exploitation vary for workers based on their structural working conditions, both domestically and transnationally (Weitzer 2009). However, the mainstream anti-sex trafficking movement frames all prostitution as commercial sexual exploitation, conflating the substantial variation of experiences in prostitution into one universal experience of victimhood from which women must be rescued (Musto 2009; Weitzer 2010). This has led some scholars to argue the anti-sex trafficking movement may be best understood as a moral crusade (Weitzer 2007; Weitzer and Ditmore 2010). By highlighting the most extreme stories of traumatized victims, the movement is able to mobilize public anger, fear, and sympathy to victims and advance its agenda: the abolition of all commercial sex (Weitzer 2007).

Feminist Activism

Throughout its history, the U.S. women’s movement has framed and reframed our public understanding of commercial sex, including sex trafficking. While prostitution had been constructed as sin or deviance, competing feminisms have sought to re-frame prostitution as either labor or violence against women. These oppositional understandings of prostitution create disparate movement goals. Feminists working to classify prostitution as a form of labor call for the decriminalization or regulation of voluntary prostitution to make sex work safer for those who perform it and for the eradication only of forced prostitution. In contrast, feminists working to define all prostitution as violence against women seek to abolish all forms of prostitution. The contemporary anti-sex trafficking movement’s framing of

all prostitution as commercial sexual exploitation emerges out of the latter feminist perspective.

The contemporary movement against sex trafficking has roots going as far back as the turn of the 20th century during which women's groups organized against what contemporaries referred to as the epidemic of "white slavery." Cultural fears over "white slavery" were explicitly about the fears of the trafficking of white women into prostitution (Doezema 1999). However, scholars overwhelmingly agree that concerns over "white slavery" in the United States and Europe around the turn of the 20th century were unsubstantiated and that the abduction of women (both white women and women of color) into forced prostitution was extremely rare (see: Connelly 1980; Doezenia 1999; Rubin 2011; Walkowitz 1980). Both the movement against white slavery and the contemporary anti-sex trafficking movement use similar rhetoric surrounding slavery, female innocence, and victimization. Both movements also have the same ultimate goal: the abolition of all prostitution (Doezenia 1999; Rubin 2011).

Although the worldwide moral panic over white slavery was largely unfounded—most women in prostitution were at the time (as today) neither white nor forced—claims-makers were responding to an expansion of migration across national borders by women in commercial sex around the turn of the 20th century. Women's temperance groups in London, such as the British Women's Temperance Association, and then eventually across Western nations brought public attention and concern to this expansion of migratory prostitution. Initially there was tension in movement leadership between those who supported the regulation of prostitution in the name of public health and abolitionists who fought for an end to all prostitution. However, as the rise of women's purity and temperance movements overtook public discourse and policy throughout Europe and the United States, the mainstream movement increasingly rejected regulation-based strategies in favor of abolitionist approaches to managing prostitution and trafficking. In the United States, the movement to eradicate "white slavery" culminated in the passage of The Mann Act in 1910. This federal legislation attempted to target traffickers through making it illegal to transport women and girls across state lines for the purposes of prostitution (Pliley 2014). However, like many contemporary legal approaches to abate trafficking, the unintended impact of this legislation was harmful to women performing commercial sex as it drove the industry further underground (Beckman 1984).

Widespread public concern over trafficking re-emerged following World War II in response to the rise of transnational migratory prostitution and trafficking during the war. However, efforts to combat prostitution and trafficking around that time were largely unsuccessful in part due to the continued friction between regulationist and abolitionist activist approaches (Scully 2001). A United Nations 1949 convention solidified

the conflation of prostitution and sex trafficking by referring to “prostitution and the accompanying evil of the traffic in persons” and declaring both to be “incompatible with the dignity and worth of the human person and endanger the welfare of the individual, family, and the community” (UN General Assembly 1949: Preamble). The convention was a major victory for abolitionist feminists, setting the frame with which the international community understood commercial sex, but had little practical import to curbing prostitution or trafficking on a global scale.

Between World War II and the 1960s, the women’s movement entered a period of abeyance (Taylor 1989). While the women’s movement re-emerged on a large scale in the 1960s it wasn’t until the feminist sex wars³ of the 1980s that anti-prostitution feminist activists were able to bring widespread concern back to the issue of prostitution and trafficking. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, combating violence against women, including sex trafficking and prostitution, emerged as one of the central goals of the international women’s movement (Bertone 2004).

While a “pro sex” feminist perspective characterized by support of “overt sexuality” and an emphasis on freedom for women’s sexual decision making has gained momentum and broader popular appeal in the contemporary United States overall (Reger 2017:117), the anti-prostitution feminist position has come to dominate global feminist politics framing commercial sex as a form of violence against women (Bertone 2004). Just as with the tension between regulationists and abolitionists at the turn of the century, and the feminist sex wars of the 1980s, competing contemporary feminisms call for vastly different framings and responses to commercial sex in the 21st century. Andrea Bertone argues the divide between these camps is more pronounced today than ever before as transnational anti-sex trafficking activism has reached unprecedented success on a global scale (2004).

The power of the anti-sex trafficking movement in the 21st century is bolstered by the turn towards what Elizabeth Bernstein (2012) terms *carceral feminism*, referring to the collaboration between feminist activists, religious organizations, and the state under neoliberalism. Bernstein argues these separate actors come together under a commitment to “carceral paradigms of justice and the militarized humanitarianism as the preeminent mode of engagement by the state” (2012: 45). This approach is especially powerful because actors reinforce the legitimacy of the other agencies—policing systems can report to be working in line with feminist aims (ending violence against women) and the social movement benefits from the resources, funding, and authority of the state. Activists working on behalf of competing feminisms have managed to shift cultural understandings surrounding prostitution. In the 21st century the movement against sex trafficking which frames of all prostitution as commercial sexual exploitation has come to dominate the transnational conversation surrounding women in prostitution.

Survivor Exclusion

The anti-sex trafficking movement's framing of all women in commercial sex as victims makes relevant the rescue of women from, and abolition of, all forms of commercial sex. This logic, along with the carceral feminist structure of the movement, forms a protectionist orientation towards women in commercial sex and leaves little space for survivors to make decisions about their own lives. Research finds survivors left out of or even strategically excluded from anti-sex trafficking movement participation and leadership (Brennan 2005; Musto 2008). Due in part to the increasing professionalization of the movement, the mainstream anti-sex trafficking movement is comprised almost entirely of conscience adherents⁴ (Harrington 1969; McCarthy and Zald 1977) who have no personal background in commercial sex. As such, the supposed movement beneficiaries—women who have been trafficked or involved in any type of commercial sex—are afforded limited avenues for participation as activists.

Shortly after the passage of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act in 2000, while the contemporary anti-sex trafficking movement was just starting to reach widespread success, Denise Brennan (2005) noted the absence of survivor voices in anti-sex trafficking social movement organizations overall, and particularly in leadership positions. She suggested movement organizations limited survivor participation out of an interest in protecting the most vulnerable victims and attributed the exclusion in part to the movement's newness. She called for more active inclusion of survivor voices within the movement over time. However, as the movement has grown, survivor participation has become even more restricted. Jennifer Musto (2008) attributes the absence of survivor participation and leadership to the increasing NGO-ification⁵ of the movement and argues that, as a result, survivor participation is unlikely to improve without significant changes to movement structure.

While earlier feminist movements framed trafficking as violence against women and brought the issue to the international spotlight, today the anti-sex trafficking movement is primarily run by professional members of the criminal justice social service alliance (Dewey and Germain 2017) as a collaboration between social service agencies and the carceral state (Musto 2016). In the private sector, social movement organizations involve a collaboration between the religious right as well as abolitionist feminist organizations working specifically to end sex trafficking (Weitzer and Ditmore 2010). The movement's orientation to victims of trafficking remains overwhelmingly protectionist and leaves little opportunity for survivors to make decisions regarding their own lives, let alone influence anti-sex trafficking policy and goals (Musto 2016).

Not only does the formal structure of the social movement exclude survivors, but also the movement's framing of the issue is such that a very limited subsection of women in commercial sex identify with the anti-sex

trafficking movement and its claims regarding victimhood and exploitation. Only women who felt that their experience in commercial sex was fundamentally victimizing can see their experiences reflected in the mainstream movement's ideology. Because the anti-sex trafficking movement's framing of the issue is based on such a small subset of overall worker experience, only those with the most egregious experiences in commercial sex are aligned with movement claims and goals. Further, only after rescue and reformation do women come to identify as survivors, leaving those women still engaged in commercial sex excluded from the movement.

Joan Kleinman and Arthur Kleinman point to the way victims are encouraged to share *trauma stories* as a form of "symbolic capital" they can use to gain access to resources and status (1996: 10). The trauma story is used as a "core cultural image of victimization" and transforms the person who has had the experience into "an image of innocence and passivity, someone who cannot represent himself, who must be represented" (Kleinman and Kleinman 1996:10). Similarly, Joel Best (1993) finds victims' *atrocious tales* are used by moral crusades to highlight the most extreme stories of victimization to garner sympathy and outrage and support for the cause.

Survivors and their stories also bring authenticity to a movement. Zakiya Luna (2017) argues social movements engage in *proximity practices* to claim their perspective is most in line with the "marginal community" being represented, and these authenticity claims are especially critical in cases where oppositional movements are competing to frame an issue around which the broader public has limited knowledge, as in the case of sex trafficking. Luna finds that "marginal movement actors [survivor activists] must simultaneously engage and challenge the structure" shaped by the dominant group (2017: 435). As a result, survivors are often invited to share their stories of victimization at anti-sex trafficking movement events but are excluded from participation as activists or leaders.

The analysis that follows is based on ethnographic fieldwork in the anti-sex trafficking movement and interviews conducted with survivors and activists in a major U.S. city over an 18-month period during 2015 and 2016. During this time, I regularly attended anti-sex trafficking movement events including meetings, conferences, fundraisers and informal gatherings of activists, as a participant observer. I also conducted approximately 30 semi-structured interviews with survivors most of whom are activists, as well as approximately 10 "expert" interviews with conscience adherent members of the movement including members of law enforcement, district attorneys and directors of non-profit organizations.⁶ This research was conducted as part of a larger ethnographic research project about the impact of prostitution policies on women in commercial sex. All survivor participants in this study identify as women and are currently over the age of 18. Most are between 18 and 35. About half were involved in commercial sex as minors, and about half became involved only as adults.

Destiny is white, all other survivors identify as women of color, the vast majority of whom identify as black.

All survivor participants in this study present themselves publicly as no longer working in commercial sex. All identify publicly with the term *survivor* in their activist work in line with the terminology of the broader social movement. Most use this term to identify specifically as a survivor of sex trafficking, signaling involvement with a pimp or trafficker during all or part of their time prostitution. Several use this term more broadly to identify as a survivor of commercial sexual exploitation, defining their experience in prostitution as inherently exploitative and traumatic, though they may or may not have been forced by an individual person. In less formal settings, many participants also use other language to talk about their background, often terms that refer to their experiences rather than to an identity, such as “in the life,” “in the game,” or “getting money.” Without exception, all survivors in this study fight to be seen for their activist contributions to the anti-sex trafficking movement, rather than defined by their experiences in commercial sex. In keeping with this commitment, throughout this chapter I do not emphasize the specific traumatic experiences of any individual participant.

Survivor Activist Participation

Movement leaders and organizers actively seek out survivors to tell their trauma stories at movement events and for public display to bring authenticity to the anti-sex trafficking movement and legitimacy to movement claims and goals. Despite the essential role of survivors, participation opportunities are typically limited to storytelling. And yet, survivors co-opt the roles to assert their humanity beyond the role of victim, build solidarity with other survivors, demand legitimacy as qualified experts, and challenge the dominant strategies and goals of the anti-sex trafficking movement. Survivor activists against trafficking must negotiate working within the movement’s structure while simultaneously resisting the movement from the inside.

Asserting Humanity

To resist the victim designation by asserting personhood is a powerful form of resistance by survivors. The one formal way survivors are typically included in movement events is through being asked to speak about their experiences of victimization. Testimony by victims at movement events is frequently the highlight of the program and movement leaders rely on these events to further the movement’s claims making and inspire other conscience adherents to participate in, and fund, the movement. While some survivors decline these speaking engagements to avoid being cast as a victim, others use the podium in a range of ways to assert their activist

commitments and goals. One way survivors can resist the trauma story is by focusing their stories not on their experiences in commercial sex but on the things that make them most ordinary. This includes resisting the victim frame on a fundamental level through asserting their basic personhood.

Jada was trafficked throughout Western Europe as a teenager and moved to the United States to rebuild her life where she founded a leading non-profit organization serving girls and women who have engaged in commercial sex. She said, "People try to pigeonhole us into a survivor box but I refuse to let them. My experiences in the commercial sex industry are a part of who I am, but they don't define me or limit me." Jada understands that she and other activists must overcome the stigma of being trafficking victims, even within the anti-sex trafficking movement.

At an activist event showcasing art made by victims of sex trafficking, as at most movement events, attendees were primarily non-survivor activists including law enforcement, social service providers, and members of the general public. Survivors present frequently highlighted aspects of their life other than their experiences in commercial sex. Ashley described herself as someone who "love[s] to grow and take care of my plants." Kiara shared "I am a great mother to my children. I am an artist. I love to read and write. I absolutely love to do hair and makeup." Jada talked about how "I really love anything related to interior design, especially renovating furniture which I do to unwind most weekends." Jada also states her point more explicitly, "Like anyone else I'm a multi-faceted complex human being." These survivors resist highlighting their victim status by doing the exact opposite— sharing what makes them like everyone else. In doing so, many invoke positive gendered categories such as "good mother" or feminine skills such as "hair and makeup" or "interior design," contrasting their potential status as fallen women with a positive femininity. Because the category of "prostitute" or even "trafficking victim" is so stigmatized as to be completely dehumanizing, survivors reject victim status through asserting their basic humanity to an audience of non-survivor movement participants, resisting the stigma survivors experience even within the mainstream anti-sex trafficking movement.

Dehumanization is often central to survivor's experience in relation to the anti-sex trafficking movement overall, not just to their presence as activists. Most survivors' first contact with the movement is through being arrested for prostitution, the primary mechanism through which the movement attempts to rescue women. For many survivors, the feelings of stigmatization and dehumanization extend back to this first point of contact. Dominique is an anti-sex trafficking activist who works at a criminal diversion program for women arrested for prostitution-related offenses. She leads group therapy sessions, runs sex trafficking prevention trainings in the greater community, and speaks at conferences and public events. In an interview, she explains that she has been trying to assert her humanity since first getting arrested in an undercover sting while being trafficked by a man

she considered her boyfriend, who she now refers to as her pimp. She recalls the first time she was booked into jail:

I just was so in over my head and the police obviously didn't really have any regards for anything that was going on. And I remember walking past some of the cells where the guys were, and no bra or anything and me trying to yell out, "I'm a master's student," and hoping that meant anything. I was like, let them know that I'm a good person. For them to understand that I have a family, that I have a father. I think that I wanted them to understand that, first, I'm human.

While Dominique often shares publicly about being trafficked, she consistently contextualizes this experience within her identity as a graduate student. She consciously uses these public engagements as opportunities to emphasize how ordinary her life is except for this one experience. Many survivors cite their supposed rescue from commercial sex, the very solution advanced by the anti-sex trafficking movement, to be the most dehumanizing and stigmatizing part of their experience in commercial sex.

In a setting where survivors are asked to recount their experiences to bring authenticity to the movement against trafficking, survivors resist the victim designation by frequently drawing upon other parts of their life to highlight their humanity. Through focusing on aspects of their lives that make them clearly like anyone else, or demonstrating a reputable form of femininity, survivors resist telling stories which would focus on their traumatic experiences and reinforce their victim status. To have to proclaim oneself as a "human being" and "like anyone else" speaks to the way survivors experience the victim designation as fundamentally erasing their humanity.

Building Collective Identity

Survivor activists also resist the victim role by invoking their status as survivors in line with coming out as a social movement tactic (Whittier 2012). By doing so, they build collective identity with other survivors (Taylor and Whittier 1992). The term "survivor" itself is a politicized social movement identity. Survivors use the term not only to mean they have exited sex trafficking or commercial sexual exploitation, but also as a collective identity tied to the anti-sex trafficking movement.

Tasha is a well-respected survivor activist in the movement who runs a leadership organization helping survivors rebuild their lives after exiting commercial sex. She also offers trainings on sex trafficking to law enforcement and service providers. She explains, "Survivor leadership means openly identifying as a survivor, for the benefit of other survivors in need of a role model, and to break negative stereotypes about individuals in the commercial sex industry." In coming out and openly identifying as a

survivor, Tasha seeks to connect with other survivors and to challenge the stigma surrounding women in commercial sex. She identifies as a survivor of sex trafficking publicly but does not dwell on the details of her traumatic experiences. Rather, she highlights the work she does to build community with other women who have been through similar experiences. Tasha was asked to speak about her victimization at an anti-sex trafficking awareness event comprised almost entirely of non-survivor activists. Despite the makeup of the audience, Tasha still addressed her remarks to any other survivors possibly present. In doing so she emphasized to survivor and non-survivor audience members alike the importance of building survivor community. She said, "The road to healing and discovery is a very long one. Be kind and patient with yourself while you are on the journey. Surround yourself with people who make you feel loved, accepted and who remind you of how wonderful you truly are." Her approach de-centers the non-survivor participants and emphasizes the degree to which her coming out is about building connections with other survivors rather than characterizing herself as a victim.

At a community human trafficking awareness event, Joanne also reaches out directly to other survivors. She said:

To every survivor, I want you to know it doesn't stop here. Being free doesn't mean you must always wear the hat of your past. None of us are required to become stagnant with the title of survivor. And though being a survivor is part of who I am, it's not all that I am.

At the same event, Huong advises:

It is possible to do more than just overcome your trauma. It is possible to reclaim your identity, to find purpose and meaning, and to feel love and joy. It's ok to explore and try new things and it's ok to break out of the ideas of who you, and others, think you should be.

Although in all of these cases the primary audience is non-survivors, survivor activists nonetheless take space to make direct appeals to reach out and build a survivor identity with each other. These appeals build connections between, and spaces for, survivors in the movement by strategically delivering their message at events designed for the general public and non-survivor activists.

Survivors also build a shared identity with other survivors and with women still involved in commercial sex through doing the on-the-ground activist work of building coalitions and organizations, networking with one another, and reaching out directly to those still in commercial sex. In contrast to conscience adherents, survivors who work or volunteer in anti-sex trafficking organizations frequently do so in a capacity that involves providing direct services to other survivors or women in commercial sex.

Unlike most of the self-identified survivors speaking at events, Tiana does not identify as having been sex trafficked. Rather, she uses the term “survivor” to refer to her experience working for decades as an independent prostitute in service of a drug addiction. Now in her 50s, Tiana is employed by an organization serving and works to counsel other black women from her neighborhood out of commercial sex (Oselin 2014). Despite her activist work, because her story falls outside of the desired victim story, Tiana is rarely asked to speak at movement events. Instead, Tiana emphasizes the importance of sharing her story with other women in commercial sex to whom she is offering help. She talks about the way coming out around her own experience helps her to connect to the young women who come for help. She explains clients “Be like, ‘oh, you don’t understand what I’m going through’” but she responds ““Yes I do baby. I’ve been there.””

Imani works at an organization serving prostitutes, primarily doing community prevention outreach, and is also involved in mentoring young women in juvenile halls who have been involved in the sex industry. She talks about the importance of giving girls “somebody to talk to [...] even as far as being able to bring them a bag of Hot Cheetos to the Juvenile Hall, that just really means a lot to them.” She explains, “Being able to support them where they’re at and meeting them at their needs is just something that I really support and I feel like it’s a big part of the movement.” While survivor activists place a value on the importance of mentoring and building solidarity with other women in the life, this is a perspective rarely shared by non-survivor activists. For Imani, offering connection and support is “part of the movement,” r an important activist contribution. However, her approach—giving support to women still in commercial sex and trying to meet their needs—is in direct contradiction to the approach of the mainstream movement that champions only the rescue of women.

Survivor activists network and build friendships, alliances, and professional relationships with one another through informal networks within the broader anti-sex trafficking movement. By sharing their histories on their own terms and using these disclosures to build connections with others, survivor activists can transform the sharing of their experience from a trauma story into a coming out, whether on stage or behind the scenes.

Demanding Recognition as Qualified Experts

Survivors come out not only to build collective identity with other survivors but to position themselves as qualified experts within the movement. While the expertise of survivors may in some ways constitute a form of “dirty knowledge” (Douglas 1966), survivors are able to use their unique insider status to demand to be taken seriously. Survivors even use their experiences to directly challenge strategies and goals of the mainstream anti-sex trafficking movement.

The contrasting orientation of activists emerged starkly at a sex trafficking awareness event in a packed church. Destiny was invited on the panel to share her history, which she did during her speech. But she also asserted that she was the true panel expert, as the only survivor featured among “experts” including members of local government and law enforcement as well as leaders of rescue organizations. When an audience member asked a police captain what he would say to someone currently being trafficked, he responded strongly that the hypothetical victim should immediately “get out of this lifestyle because it’s a dead end” and that “we [the police department] are here to help you.” The panel moderator took this further, asking the panel at-large to agree that “there is no reason for [victims] to be afraid” and any victim should “get help today.” While all the professional “experts” nodded and softly clapped confirming the captain’s sentiments, Destiny disagreed with a visible grimace. Her marked disagreement prompted the moderator to comment, “Destiny, I don’t like the look you’re giving.” As the moderator’s comment makes clear, Destiny’s contributions beyond her personal story of victimhood were not only unsolicited but were expressly unwelcome. Still, Destiny insisted that there may be a lot of good reasons for someone in commercial sex to choose not to “get out right now” including basic safety concerns and lack of resources and alternatives. “I don’t want to just be like ‘Oh, you’ll be fine,’” she explains, “I don’t want to downplay the risk that they might actually be experiencing.” In speaking out, she affirmed her expertise and knowledge of the many complex barriers women face when attempting to exit commercial sex. Destiny’s explanation prompted other panel members to agree that there are legitimate reasons why people involved in commercial sex might not want or be able to exit immediately, changing the course of the conversation to include an analysis of structural barriers. In sum, Destiny’s objection undermined a fundamental claim of the movement: women in commercial sex just need to be saved.

Some survivors claim expertise during their first coming out. Tiffany worked in grassroots community organizing for almost 20 years, successfully winning campaigns advocating for the rights of low-wage workers in the United States and Mexico. Throughout her activist career she never shared her experience of having been “trafficked by a gang” until she became involved in fight over prostitution-free zones⁷ in her city. She recalls listening to a police officer testify about local prostitution, “He described these women as dirty drug addicts making millions off of walking in their neighborhoods. So I shared my experience and the experiences of others I know.” For Tiffany, coming out and sharing her story was part of her activist commitment to campaigning for the rights of workers. As she explains, “We carry a knowledge that no one else has, and that voice needs to be heard if we are going to make a substantial change in human trafficking.” Similarly, Melissa makes a direct claim to her authority grounded in her experience, saying, “I will never be ashamed of what God has

brought me out of. Without that, I would not be able to train law enforcement, community advocates, medical professionals and faith based communities on how to help others like me.”

Other survivors develop a sense of themselves as experts over the course of years. Morgan first became involved in activism and public speaking as a young teenager when she was sent to an intervention program for minors in the sex trade. Through the organization she was encouraged to share her story of victimization publicly and at the time she obliged. Having spent her teen years and early adulthood in and out of the commercial sex industry, she says, “I still really love public speaking and am proud to be on panels at colleges and events... not to tell my story, but to share ideas and recommendations, particularly around prevention.”

Positioning themselves as experts often means survivors are the only voices demanding structural change or posing survivor-informed care at a given event. While speaking on a panel at an event dedicated to celebrating the success of a new countywide human trafficking task force, Dominique called for the focus to shift away from women in the life. While the rest of the day had been focused on psychological individual-level intervention strategies, Dominique spoke up for the need for large-scale structural reform. “I think we should focus on community development,” she explained. She talked about just having been in a nearby neighborhood well-known for street prostitution and seeing “motels and the girls in the hot shorts and you see the guys out there with the dogs and stuff [and] if we could develop these communities [or put] a community center in these places!” Her suggestions located the “problem” of trafficking not within individual actors, but as a larger issue calling for structural and economic reform. In this auditorium filled with high-ranking members of law enforcement, district attorneys, and judges she directly confronted the celebrated policies that claim to help victims of trafficking through carceral protection. “I was trafficked,” Dominique says, “I graduated with a degree in communications [and] all of my work and all of that schooling and that \$20,000 worth of student loans is going down the drain because I have a criminal record.” After the event, several members of the task force politely thanked Dominique for coming to speak, though none appeared to take her concerns or suggestions seriously.

Destiny, the founder and executive director of an organization dedicated to outreach and support for women in commercial sex, recommends a specific “trauma-informed” approach when conducting outreach that she calls “listening to the invitation.” Destiny explains this means “we’re listening to what are we being invited to by her [the outreach recipient]. This sets it up so that we’re empowering her and letting her lead the mentoring relationship.” As she described, this practice “empowers the person that we’re working with and shows them a measure of respect.” Her organization also trains others to replicate this model of outreach in their own communities. This orientation of providing support and service differs

dramatically from the protectionist rescue efforts typically adopted by anti-sex trafficking rescue organizations.

Often the very rescue efforts heralded by the movement can represent the largest barriers to exit commercial sex. Dominique, who works at the prostitution diversion program, sees first hand how current policies put forth by the anti-sex trafficking movement advocating increased policing in the name of rescuing women can harm the very women they purport to serve. Anti-sex trafficking organizations overwhelmingly advocate for a system in which increased law enforcement efforts target traffickers and buyers of commercial sex and treat women as victims. However, Dominique finds that often pimps face no consequences even though “the reality [is that] these girls’ jaws are being broken open, and they’re being thrown out of cars, and they’re being starved to death.” At the same time, overwhelmingly her clients are arrested for prostitution-related offenses and are put in “a situation where they get records and they have to get back on the street” even when they want to leave commercial sex. Further, she explains that her clients regularly express “that if they didn’t have a record, if they could just find a job, and just have an apartment, and have their [kids] living at home with them, [...] that they wouldn’t be doing this. But that’s not a reality because we’re criminalizing these girls.” From her experience as a survivor and her professional experience which regularly brings her into contact with women who have been arrested for prostitution, Dominique has a sophisticated understanding of the ways the policies advocated for by the anti-sex trafficking movement affect women on the ground. When speaking at movement events and conferences, which she does regularly, Dominique shares her personal experiences but also strongly advocates for policies which give women who want to leave “the life” realistic opportunities to find other work and avoid criminal sanctions.

At the celebration of a new county-level human trafficking task force, survivors focused their stories on their activist work as leaders in the community. The questions from the audience illustrated the survivors’ success in shifting the focus away from victimhood. A social worker asked the survivors for advice when working with parents whose children have been trafficked. Another asked about racial disparities and the reason for the overrepresentation of black girls as victims of trafficking. A police officer asked about the place of men in the anti-sex trafficking movement. All of the audience’s questions oriented the survivors as experts on trafficking, and not at all to their specific personal traumas. At least at this community level, survivor activists were able to transcend the opportunities available to them as victims and demand to be taken seriously as experts and activists. While survivors may often be invited to events to share their stories of victimhood, they refuse to be reduced to their trauma stories or atrocity tales to blindly advance of the movement’s agenda. Instead, survivors manage to assert their authority as the true experts, at times even challenging the strategies and goals of the anti-sex trafficking movement.

Conclusion

Overall, I find that survivor activists are demanding a seat at the table. Currently valued for their victim stories rather than their activism or expertise, survivors face stigma and exclusion even within the anti-sex trafficking movement. Survivors are forced to navigate working within restricted opportunities to participate as activists in the movement while also attempting to create change in the movement from within.

Survivor activists, as with many others who believe in or advocate for feminist positions, do not necessarily identify as feminists (Crossley 2010). Jo Reger (2012) finds contemporary feminism is “everywhere and nowhere.” Feminism can be a “set of ideas and identities diffused into the culture and structure of society” which “informs, sometimes unconsciously” the activism of contemporary feminists (2012: 5). She also finds contemporary feminism can “maintain its relevance but is submerged into other movements, issues, and groups” (p. 5). The survivor activists who work on the front lines of the movement are part of a long history of feminist activism working to redefine trafficking and prostitution as violence against women and to end that violence. As such, I argue that the survivor activist identity *is* a feminist identity.

Survivors already can and do make essential movement contributions. Survivors are able to offer unparalleled support to peers in commercial sex. It is survivors who are bringing a feminist structural analysis to the movement against sex trafficking and demanding massive structural reforms. Survivors call for not only an end to trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation but to systems of oppression that keep women, especially working class women and women of color, particularly vulnerable to circumstances which make entering or staying in prostitution a rational choice. All of these contributions are essential to the success of a feminist social movement against trafficking.

Questions remain regarding the overall impact and future of survivor activism. As the anti-sex trafficking movement grows in success and comes to increasingly dominate our cultural understanding of commercial sex and legal responses, opportunities for survivors to impact the movement’s strategies and goals become increasingly restricted. There is little room for disparate narratives that are antithetical to the claims of the mounting moral crusade. In the face of this growing momentum, a shift to center anti-sex trafficking movement beneficiaries will require a fundamental transformation of the movement. It is the responsibility of feminist activists working on behalf of trafficking victims and women in commercial sex to fight alongside survivors to put the contemporary anti-sex trafficking movement back in line with fundamental feminist principles.

Notes

- 1 Throughout this chapter I use “commercial sex” as an umbrella term to refer to all forms of prostitution including that performed by victims of trafficking, chosen freely by sex workers, and all of the many experiences in between. The anti-sex

trafficking movement uses the term “commercial sexual exploitation” to describe all forms of prostitution and frame all forms as exploitation. I choose to use “commercial sex” in an attempt to balance both staying consistent with the language of the anti-sex trafficking movement while also recognizing all those who engage in prostitution and do not experience exploitation. I use the term “trafficking” specifically to refer to commercial sex that involves force, fraud, or coercion.

- 2 See Brennan (2005) and Musto (2008) and Grant (2014), respectively.
- 3 For more information on the feminist sex wars and their relationship to anti-sex trafficking activism see Miriam (2005).
- 4 McCarthy and Zald (1977: 1222) define conscience adherents as “individuals and groups who are part of the appropriate SM [social movement] but do not stand to benefit directly from SMO [social movement organization] goal accomplishment.”
- 5 NGO-ification refers to the increased professionalization of the movement based in non-governmental organizations and their relationship to the Federal government (Musto 2008).
- 6 All names of participants are pseudonyms.
- 7 Prostitution-free zones are a designation for urban areas known for prostitution that expands law enforcement’s authority to disperse and arrest people suspected to be congregating for the purposes of engaging in commercial sex. The designation gives the appearance of a “tough on crime” approach but typically only contributes to temporary displacement of street-based prostitution.

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